



THE HANDSTAND

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A LAST LOOK AT THE TUBE



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With TV, Shakespeare's "All the World's a stage" flips into "all the stage is a world", in which there is no audience and everybody has become an actor, or participant.

When one says that "the medium is the message", it is to point out that every medium whatever creates an environment of services and disservices which constitutes the special effect and character of that medium. Tony Schwartz points out that one of the major aspects of the TV image is that it uses the eye as an ear, since it is a resonating audile-tactile form of innumerable gaps that have to be filled in by the viewer:

In watching television, our eyes function like our ears. They never see a picture, just as our ears never hear a word. The eye receives a few dots of light during each successive millisecond, and sends these impulses to the brain. (1)

It is this open-mesh image that is so entirely involving, even to the point of inducing semi-hypnotic trance; and this raises a matter that confuses many people not familiar with the structural character of our sensory experience. It was the symbolists who had stressed the character of the discontinuous as the key to tactility and involvement: their structures were never continuous or connected statements so much as suggestive juxtapositions. As Mallarme put it: "To define is to kill. To suggest is to create." The simultaneous world of electric information is always lacking in visual connectedness and always structured by resonant intervals. The resonant interval, as Heisenberg explains, is the world of touch, so that acoustic space is simultaneously tactile.

Any medium presents a figure whose ground is always hidden, or subliminal. In the case of TV, as of the telephone and radio, the subliminal ground could be called the discarnate or disembodied user. This is to say that when you are "on the telephone", or "on the air", you do not have a physical body. In these media, the sender is sent, and is instantaneously present everywhere. The disembodied user extends to all those who are recipients of electric information. It is these people who constitute the mass audience, because mass is a factor of speed rather than quantity, although popular speech permits the term mass to be used with large publics.

Discarnate man, deprived of his physical body, is also deprived of his relationship to Natural Law and physical law. As a discarnate intelligence, he is as weightless as an astronaut, but able to move very much faster. Minus the physical mesh of Natural Laws, the user of electronic services is largely deprived of his private identity. The TV experience is an inner trip, and is as addictive as many known drugs. The discarnate TV user lives in a world between fantasy and dream, and is in a typically hypnotic state which is the ultimate form and level of participation.

The world of fantasy is an inner world whereas the world of dreams tends toward outer orientation and aspiration and deferred gratification. On the other hand, fantasies are instant and are their own satisfaction. The discarnate TV user, with a strong bias toward fantasy, dispenses with the real world, even in the newscasts. The news automatically becomes the real world for the TV user and is not a substitute for reality, but is itself an immediate reality.

Death on TV is a form of fantasy: On television, violence is virtually the sole cause of death; it is only on soap operas, and then very rarely, that anyone dies of

age or disease. But violence performs its death-dealing service quickly, and then the victim is whisked off camera. The connection of death to real people and real feelings is anonymous, clinical, and forgotten in the time it takes to spray on a new and longer-lasting deodorant.(2)

The fantasy violence on TV is a reminder that the violence of the real world is much motivated by people questing for lost identity. Rollo May and others have pointed out that violence in the real world is the mark of those questing for identity. On the frontier everybody is a nobody, and therefore the frontier manifests the patterns of toughness and vigorous action on the part of those trying to find out who they are.

A more characteristic form of identity quest under electric conditions is the universal theme of nostalgia. When our world exists only in fantasy and memory, the natural strategy for identity is nostalgia, so that today revivals occur so frequently that they are now called "recurrences" (in the recording industry).



In his book Do It, Jerry Rubin wrote after the trial:

Television creates myths bigger than reality. Whereas a demo drags on for hours and hours, TV packs all the action into two minutes - a commercial for the revolution. On the television screen, news is not so much reported as created. An event happens when it goes on TV and becomes a myth...Television is a non-verbal instrument, so turn off the sound, since no one ever remembers any words that they hear, the mind being a technicolour movie of images, not words. There's no such thing as bad coverage for a demo. It makes no difference what's said: the pictures are the stories.(3)

The social myth is a kind of mask of one's time, a "put on" which is also a form of body language. It is this body language which relates the TV form of the right hemisphere of the brain and brings us directly into relation to TV politics. Whereas the left hemisphere is sequential and logical, verbally connected and syntactic, the right hemisphere is simultaneous and acoustic, emotional and intuitive. The electric environment tends to give a lot of stress and power to the right hemisphere, just as the old

industrial and literate environment had given corresponding dominance to the left hemisphere. The left hemisphere had been favored by the words of literacy, and of market organization with its quantitative goals and specialist structure. These worlds have been increasingly obsolesced by the instant environment and instant replays that enhance the simultaneous character of the right hemisphere.

Electronic or discarnate man is automatically committed to the primacy of the right hemisphere. In political terms the instant mask, a mythic structure, gives sudden prominence to the charismatic image of the political leader. He must evoke nostalgic memories of many figures that have been admired in the past. Policies and parties yield to the magic of the leader's image. The arguments in the Ford/Carter debates were as insignificant as the fact of their party affiliation.

If discarnate man has a very weak awareness of private identity and has been relieved of all commitments to law and morals, he has also moved steadily toward involvement in the occult, on one hand, and loyalty to the superstate as a substitute for the supernatural on the other hand. For discarnate man the only political regime that is reasonable or in touch with him is totalitarian - the state becomes religion. When loyalty to Natural Law declines, the supernatural remains as an anchorage for discarnate man; and the supernatural can even take the form of the sort of megamachines of the state that Mumford talks about as existing in Mesopotamia and Egypt some 5,000 years ago. The megamachines of North America, for example, can take the form of the fifty-three billion dollar ad industry for manipulating our corporate psyches, or they can be the equally vast security systems constituted by what Peter Drucker calls our "pension fund socialism":

Through their pension funds, employees of American business today own at least 25 percent of its equity capital, which is more than enough for control. The pension funds of the self-employed, of the public employees, and of school and college teachers own at least another 10 percent, giving the workers of America ownership of more than one-third of the equity capital of American business.(4)

Meantime, our own megamachine for daily living presents us with the world as "a sum of lifeless artifacts", as Erich Fromm explains:



The world becomes a sum of lifeless artifacts; from synthetic food to synthetic organs, the whole man becomes part of the total machinery that he controls and is simultaneously controlled by. He has no plan, no goal for life, except doing what the logic of technique determines him to do. He aspires to make robots as one of the greatest achievements of his technical mind, and some specialists assure us that the robot will hardly be distinguished from living men. This achievement will not seem so astonishing when man himself is hardly distinguishable from a robot.(5)

When the viewer himself becomes a kind of discarnate information pattern, the saturation of that pattern of an electric environment of similar patterns gives us the world of the contemporary TV user. This is a parallel to the computer - the only technology that lives on, and produces, the same material.

(1)-Tony Schwarz,"The Responsive Chord"[New York:Anchor Press1973],14

(2)-Frank Mankiewicz and Joel Swerlow,"RemoteControl: Television and the Manipulation of American Life" [New York, Quadrangle/the New York Times Book company,1978,from unrevised galley proofs.

(3)-Jerry Rubin "Do it",as quoted in Malcolm Muggeridge,"Christ and the Media:London Lectures in Contemporary Christianity"[Toronto:Ecclesia Books,Hodder &Stoughton,1977) 67

(4)-Peter Drucker,"The Unseen Revolution"(New York, Harper & Row,1976,1

(5)-Erich Fromm, "The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness"[Greenwich:Fawcett 1975]389
